



HERBERT FORD

BY EDWARD THOMAS | PHOTO BY MARK STAFF

THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE **HOME**

Scampering along the mostly dirt roads of Hilton Head Island in the 1950s, young **Herbert Ford** could never have imagined that one day he would be setting up threat vulnerability and risk analysis programs to help protect American interests at the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens, Greece. But that is part of the fascinating and largely classified life story of this native islander who has returned to embrace new opportunities on his beloved island overlooking the green salt marshes of Broad Creek.

The middle son of 12 children raised by Clarence and Mary Ford on a small farm overlooking the creek's headwaters in the

mid-island Hilton Head neighborhood still called Chaplin by native islanders, Ford has many fond memories of a community life that has long since disappeared.

"Our home stood across the road from where Grant's Mini-Mart is today," recalls Ford, whose father raised vegetables and other crops, tilling the fertile, soft sandy soil with a horse and plow. "Our family would harvest the crops and cart them to Charlie Simmons for transportation across the inland waterway to be sold at markets in Bluffton and Savannah." Ford's memories include a wood burning stove in winter and lots of mosquitoes on hot, muggy mid-summer

days when the offshore breezes were still.

Back then, the midsection of Hilton Head consisted largely of numerous small family farms that spread like a patchwork quilt across much of present-day Shelter Cove Towne Centre and across Chaplin Public Park, all the way to Folly Field Road. It was a bountiful playground for Ford and his close friends, James Grant and Anthony Brown. On many warm days, the three would finish their chores and take off up the road to go crabbing along the creek or play baseball at Blue Jay Field.

Grant remembers Ford as "studious, but also a pretty darn good shortstop," while Brown recalls him as a sharp dresser, especially on Sundays at St. James Baptist Church. Both remember him as soft-spoken, loyal and "really smart" in school. In fact, the three buddies plus Annie Lou Holmes competed earnestly from the first grade onward to be at the top of their class. It was Ford, however, who finished as valedictorian for the class of 1971. It was the first graduating class in the newly integrated H.E. McCracken High School in Bluffton.

Ford credits his academic zeal to the tone set by Ernestine Jones, an English teacher who traveled with daily devotion from Savannah to Hilton Head and Bluffton's all-black public schools. "We still keep in touch after all these years," says Ford, who retired from a 29-year CIA career that earned him a Distinguished Career Intelligence Medal "for distinctly exceptional achievements that constituted a major contribution to the mission of the agency."

It was academic excellence and love for learning new things that initially earned Ford several college scholarship opportunities, as well as the attention of Ben Racusin – a former senior officer with the CIA who had retired to Hilton Head and was later elected as the island's first mayor. Racusin set the wheels in motion for Ford to join the CIA, setting him off on a career covering three decades and including highly sensitive tours to Europe, the Middle East, Afghanistan and Asia.

As someone who has spent most of his professional life being watchful of the dangers to America, Ford understands the sensitivity many Americans feel about current circumstances in the world. But he believes strongly in the importance of keeping our nation's doors open. "Embracing diversity is critical to sustaining a bright future," Ford said. **M**